Chapter 1

THE COMMUNITY OF BANG CHAN

The Geographical Setting

In the populous flat central plain of Thailand where Bang Chan was located, fenceless geometric rice-fields, dotted by clumps of trees, stretch as far as the eye can see. Houses, clustering occasionally into hamlets, line the canals that serve for domestic use, drainage, irrigation, and communication. A few rounded-up roads lead out from Bangkok, the national capital on the Menam Chao Phraya, the great central river.

The monsoon divides the year into three seasons: a hot and wet (late May through November); a cool and dry (December to mid-February); and a hot and dry (late February to mid-May). The temperatures range annually from 59° to 89° F. (15° to 32° C.) with monthly means of 77° to 86° F. (25° to 30° C.) (de Young:5). A drop at night averages around 18° F. (10° C.) in April, and 22° F. (12° C.) in January, while the relative humidity varies between 65 per cent and 81 per cent (Hauck, et al.:12). Rainfall averages about 50 inches a year, 40 of which fall in the wet season (Janlekha:21). Because of the run-off from the mountains in the north, once a year the Menam Chao Phraya slowly rises, fills the canals and then overflows its banks, covering the plain for hundreds of miles to a depth of three feet or more. In Bang Chan, the water stood on the land from June until January, with its peak in October. From February to May the canals ran low, and the land dried and cracked from the intense heat.

The Community

In 1954, 1700 persons (336 families) lived in Bang Chan. Muslims, comprising 10 per cent of the population, lived as fully Thai citizens in all parts of the community in economic and social symbiosis with Buddhists. A few ethnic Chinese had married into Thai families and were accepted.

The community spread over an area of about 7000 rai (1000 hectares or 5 square miles). Bang Chan Canal bisected

278 [563] The Chinese druggists, many of whom stocked among their traditional pharmacopeia a few modern medications, gave out occasionally to their customers information derived from the manufacturer's instructions for use. People with minor indispositions sometimes sought a druggist's advice. He suggested traditional or modern remedies, depending on the wishes of the customer. Thus, the druggists also acted as a bridge to the use of modern remedies.

484 Facets of Social Life Pertinent to Childbearing:

Communication and Transportation

People went to Minburi, and less often to Bangkok, to buy, sell, work, or visit relatives. A few adults had never been outside Bang Chan.

494 [484] [206] [493] Along the road buses passed Bang Chan every two or three hours during the daytime only. Minburi was a ten minute ride, Bangkok, an hour. Minburi had no taxis, and no telephones existed to call a taxi from Bangkok. Two or three persons owned bicycles.

505 484 Within Bang Chan, transportation varied with the season. From June to February travel was entirely by boat, even to a neighbor. A message to a local midwife, for instance, could be carried quickly by a speedy paddler in his skiff. If an emergency trip to the Minburi Health Center appeared necessary, a person could be rowed fairly comfortably along the canal that bordered the road. Going by boat to Bangkok, a whole day's row away, or four hours by the motor boat from Minburi, was not considered convenient even for passenger traffic, much less for a sick person or a woman in labor.

484 844 [494] The inconvenient time of year was the three month dry season. Boats then could hardly go on the canal that ran through the middle of Bang Chan, while the smaller canals became muddy or even dry. Walking barefoot over sharp stubble in tropical sun was hard. To transport a woman in labor, assuming she could stand it, an improvised stretcher could be made, but to subject her to the jolting bus was usually foolhardy. It was not customary to flag down passing cars. If things went wrong for a woman in labor during the hot, dry season, there was practically no chance of getting her to a hospital, and none of getting modern help to her.

243 Work Habits in the Economy

433 Because of the annual flood the land was admirably suited to growing a single bounteous crop of rice. After all needs fo

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132 Bangkok. The tropical monsoon climate divides the year into three seasons, a hot, wet season from late May to November, a cooler, dry season from December to early February, and a hot, 361 dry season from late February to mid-May. The community, scattered over an area of approximately five square miles, was 161 composed of seven neighboring hamlets. In 1954, the population 162 was approximately 1700, divided among 336 households. About 60 per cent of the households were made up of independent families, parents with unmarried children, with an average family [463] size of 5.7 persons. The main occupation of 80 per cent of all families was rice farming.

243 The climate together with the overflowing Chao Phraya [13] river, provided natural conditions for raising a single crop [221] of wet rice. From May or June to February, the principal activities were those connected with rice production. This crop greatly exceeded the needs for local consumption as human food, [433] feed, and seed. The surplus of rice which was sold, was estimated for 1953 as 1.4 times the amount used for all purposes within the village (Janlekha, 1955).

346 Wat Bang Chan, the Buddhist monastery and place for re- 621 ligious exercises, was also the center of social life in the [795] community. When data for this study were being gathered, the one primary school in the village was located on the grounds of the wat. The community was defined simply by the clientele which patronized Wat Bang Chan and this elementary school. [563] Within the area of the community lived a small minority of Thai Moslems who patronized a mosque and school just outside Bang Chan. The few Chinese in the village were considered as part [028] of the Thai-Buddhist community. Information to be presented on food habits refers primarily to habits of the Buddhist majority, although some reference will be made to ways in which Moslem practices differed therefrom.

193 Although for six or more months of the year the fields 243 were covered with water, sometimes to a depth of a meter or 491 more, a year-round road, connecting Bangkok and Minburi, the 484 nearest market town, ran through one edge of the village. Bus 487 service was available along this road, to either Bangkok or [494] Minburi but within the community one went by boat on the network of canals during the wet season, and during the dry season, [503] on foot along the dikes or across fields. From late January through May, when subsidiary canals were apt to be dry, getting about was somewhat difficult. Boat travel was considered easy, but as many families had only one boat, a trip to the store or even to a neighbor's home had to be planned with reference to the activities of other family members.

443 Large scale purchases, as for a ceremony, were always made at a big market, but in general, instead of people going to the market-town, the "market" came to the people. Boat-venders brought not only fresh produce and staples but also sweets, ices, soft drinks, and cooked foods such as Chinese

There was an important psychological difference between the two work seasons. At planting time, people were anxious; at harvest they were happy. People saw cash just ahead, for the crop was now safe. Each host of a cooperative work party gave at least one big convivial feast, the best he could provide and even the hired laborers got a round of liquor. People joked more than usual at work. Two boat loads of workers were observed racing down a canal at 6 a.m., shouting and cheering, although they had probably worked long hours for days or weeks before. Everyone knew that a joyous season was at hand.

When the crop was in, the people rested, fished, and began to prepare for big ceremonies demanding organized work. Supplies of fish were needed for preserving or for feasts. Labor and engines were now available, and with water low, fishponds could be conveniently drained, and the fish on the muddy bottom caught. A pond might be drained two or three times a year, but timing was determined by the availability of equipment and workers and by the needs of the annual ceremonial cycle. One pot of fish was given to each helper at a cooperative pond-draining.

Most farmers sold their rice in February. Capital was invested in farm equipment, buffalo, housing and ceremonies. Debts were cleared if possible. Cash expenditures for food, which had declined progressively since the beginning of the rice year, reached the yearly minimum, mostly because people had ample time to fish. People also saved up their money if they were sponsoring a ceremony, ate lightly at home if they were going to one. Since school closed from March 15 to May 1, because of the heat, money was not given to children for snacks.

The land dried up and cracked, rainwater for drinking gave out, and some canals were reduced to mud. Cherished plants were kept alive by watering, but no new planting could be done. Buffalo, which at either seasons were confined and fed, now roamed the fields, nibbling stubble. Everyone was busy and happy. Ordinations, weddings, cremations, merit-making feasts and several big holidays came one after another. Of the four New Year's Days observed in Bang Chan, the Buddhist New Year, which because of the lunar calendar fell about mid-April, was the most important, being celebrated over two days with extensive offerings of food to the priests and with other activities. The official New Year's Day, January 1, and the traditional New Year's Day about November 1, had rather slight observances. Chinese New Year's, in February, was celebrated by the Chinese residents who presented a school teacher and their hamlet headmen each with a boiled chicken and a Chinese sweet. Lent officially closed the ceremonial season, but the advent of plowing-time slowed the pace considerably.

When the rains finally came, the rice year started again.

Attitudes Toward Food

262 To older Bang Chan residents, to lack rice was to starve
[26] even though fish or vegetable fare were at hand. Since rice
262 was the staff of life, many important customs clustered about
243 it. Ceremonies to the Rice Goddess accompanied the raising,
[187] selling, and storing of rice. When the unhusked rice was in the bin, it could not be withdrawn at any time as needed, but astrological charts had to be consulted to make sure the day was auspicious. Paddy could never be withdrawn on Friday, a [189] day sacred to the Rice Goddess. After cooking, the best rice was said to be at the mouth of the pot, so this was offered on ceremonial occasions. Important rules were that when cooking rice, the cover of the pot must never be laid in a mortar and it must be inverted, never laid down flat; otherwise one would be short of rice. One must never scrape the top of the rice with the cover, or the "soul" of the rice would be scraped [184] out of the pot. Moslem residents murmured an Arabic prayer [543] every time the rice was put into the pot, and every time the pot was put onto the fire, as well as before eating.

261 Rice has been generally regarded as the strength-giving
262 food par excellence. A portion of Chutima's (1939) description of the "old system" follows:

> Our children and young women are forbidden by ancient doctrine from eating any fair quantity of animal products, but must eat plenty of rice which is considered as the only true food, the others being only appetizers. And to stimulate the palate, large quantities of hot and irritating condiments (chilies and peppers principally) are consumed at every meal. Some vegetables, boiled or raw, are also included, but in small quantities in spite of abundant supply.

The quotation indicates first that in the past, rice was considered much more important as food than the "with-rice" [650] dishes. Since the Food and Drug Division of the Ministry of Public Health has been attempting to encourage the eating of more "with-rice," the attitudes found in Bang Chan are of interest. One informant stated that only rice can make children fat, and that the "hot taste" foods help them to eat more rice. Another commented that rice makes children strong, and "with-rice" makes them weak. Another, a mother of seven children, said that if babies were given too much "with-rice" they would be potbellied. The more modern view was expressed by an informant who said that a certain child ate only rice with fish, and was weak; he refused vegetables and banana. One affluent farmer, an elderly man whose orphaned grandchild was being raised on cow's milk (evaporated or dried milk, diluted with boiled water) expressed the opinion that the ancient belief was based on thrift. He said that thrifty

7: Janlekha X-4,5 (1948-1953)p956 AO7 Central Thai AO7
Bangchan

243 441 Before War II, the problem in rice marketing had been one of alleged usurpation by the Chinese middlemen -- the rice dealers and the millers. Expert organizational ability, it has been observed, has put the Chinese in control over the internal rice trade of the country. Even now, all the five rice dealers operating in Bangchan are Chinese, and the three largest rice mills in the market town of Minburi are owned and operated by the Chinese. The other rice mill -- the smallest of the four in operation in Minburi -- is owned by a Moslem.

243 441 435 563 Ingram observes that the postwar system has had the effect of increasing the number of Thai middlemen and exporters. The fixed buying price of the Rice Office introduced a degree of stability into the paddy market and enabled Thai middlemen to compete with the Chinese. Formerly, the price of paddy fluctuated wildly from place to place and from month to month because of the variety of measures used in buying it, because of seasonal variations, and because of the many transactions involving merchandise or loans. Thai middlemen did not have the working capital, the experience, or the trading ability to compete with the Chinese under those conditions. But when the millers' buying prices became fixed within narrow limits for long periods, the middleman function was greatly simplified. No doubt other factors were involved, but people in the rice trade consider the greater stability of prices to be of major importance in the rise of Thai middlemen.[7]

7. Ibid., p. 92.

243 441 663

Relative to the enormous problem created by export and exchange control, the internal marketing problem now appears to be small at least in its relative effect on rice growers. It is true that the Chinese combines in the forms of Rice Dealers' Association and Rice Mills' Association have consolidated economic influence in favor of the Chinese middlemen in Bangkok. But it is equally true that competition among the Chinese rice dealers and millers in the countryside also has worked to the advantage of growers.

It has been observed that the Chinese dealers in Bangchan offer prices to farmers that scarcely differ from prices that the farmers could get from the millers if they were to break the existing pattern and deal directly with the millers themselves. This would often be possible because most of the local farmers possess the large chala boats needed to convey paddy to the mills which are only a few miles away. Actually, the Chinese rice dealers and Bangchan farmers have been observed to be in a rather efficient state of economic symbiosis that compares favorably [186] with most inter-ethnic divisions of labor. Further attestation is found in that there appears to be extremely little anti-Chinese sentiment among the villagers, and this is despite the fact that the national government has from time to time taken somewhat spirited measures against the [426] Chinese. The favors, non-interest bearing loans, and good will gestures accorded the Thai farmers by local Chinese dealers should also be taken into consideration.